

DEFENDING ELYSIUM

BY BRANDON SANDERSON

The woman thrashed and spasmed in the hospital bed. Her dark hair was matted to her head with sweat, and her uncontrolled motions seemed almost epileptic. Her eyes, however, did not have the wildness of the insane—instead they were focused. Determined. She was not mad; she just couldn't control her muscles. She kept waving her hands in front of her with awkward movements, movements that seemed strangely familiar to Jason.

And she did it all in silence, never uttering a word.

Jason switched off the holovid, then leaned back in his chair. He had watched the vid a dozen times, but it still confused him. However, he couldn't do anything until he arrived at Evensong. Until then, he would simply have to bide his time.

Jason Write had always felt an empathy for the Outer Platforms. There was something about the way they hung alone in space, claimed by neither planet nor star. They weren't lonely—they were . . . solitary. Autonomous.

Jason sat beside the shuttle's port window, looking at Evensong as it approached. The platform resembled others of its kind—a flat sheet of metal fifty miles long, with buildings sprouting from both its top and bottom. It wasn't a ship, or even a space station—it was nothing more than a collection of random buildings surrounded by a bubble of air.

Of all the Outer Platforms, Evensong was the most remote. It hung between the orbits of Saturn and Uranus, the farthest deep-space human outpost. In a way, it was like an Old West border town, marking the edge of civilization. Except in this case—no matter what humankind liked to think—civilization lay outside the border, not within it.

As the shuttle approached, Jason could Sense the city's separate skyrisers and towers, many of them linked by walkways. He sat with his eyes turned to the window, though the position was redundant. He had been legally blind since he'd turned sixteen. It had been years since he could even make out shadows or light. Fortunately, he had other methods of seeing.

He could Sense lights shining from windows and streets. To him, their white light was a quiet buzz in his mind. He could also Sense the line of buildings rising in a way that was almost reminiscent of an old Earth city skyline. Of course, there wasn't really a sky or a horizon. Just the blackness of space.

Blackness. Voices laughed in the back of his mind. Memories. He pushed them away. The shuttle slid into Evensong's atmospheric envelope—the platform had no sphere or force field, like some of the older space stations employed. Element-specific gravity generators had eliminated the need for such things and had opened space for mankind. ESG, along with fusion

generators, meant that humankind could toss an inert piece of metal into space, then populate it with millions of individuals.

Jason sat back as the shuttle made its final approach. He had a private cabin, of course. It was well furnished and comfortable—a necessity for such a long trip. The room smelled faintly of his dinner—steak—and otherwise had a sterile, well-cleaned scent to it. Jason approved—if he had owned a home, he would have kept it in a similar way.

I suppose it is time for the vacation to end, Jason thought. Silently bidding farewell to his relaxed solitude, Jason reached up to tap the small control disk attached to the skin behind his right ear. A sound clicked in his ear—the acknowledgment that his call was being relayed across the void to Earth so far away. Faster-than-light communication—a gift given to Earth as a reward for mankind’s most embarrassing political faux pas of all time.

“You called,” a perky feminine voice sounded in his ear.

Jason sighed. “Lanna?” he asked.

“Yup.”

“I don’t suppose anyone else is there?” Jason asked.

“Nope, just me.”

“Aaron?”

“Assigned to Riely,” Lanna said. “He’s investigating CLA labs on Jupiter Platform Seventeen.”

“Doran?”

“On maternity leave. You’re stuck with me, old man.”

“I’m not old,” Jason said. “The shuttle has arrived. I’m initiating a constant link.”

“Affirmative,” Lanna replied.

Jason felt the shuttle set down in the docks. “Where’s my hotel?”

“It’s fairly close to the shuttle docks,” Lanna replied. “It’s called the Regency Fourth. You’re registered as a Mr. Elton Flippenday.”

Jason paused. “Elton Flippenday?” he asked flatly, feeling the docking clamps send a shudder through the ship. “What happened to my standard alias?”

“John Smith?” Lanna asked. “That’s far too boring, old man.”

“It’s not boring,” Jason said. “It’s unassuming.”

“Yes. Well, I know rocks that are less ‘unassuming’ than that name. It’s boring. You operatives are supposed to lead lives of excitement and danger—John Smith doesn’t fit.”

This is going to be a long assignment, Jason thought.

A quiet sound buzzed in the room—an indication that docking had finished. Jason rose, fetched his single bag of luggage, slid on his sunglasses, and left his quarters. He knew the glasses would look odd, but his sightless eyes tended to put people on edge. Especially when they discovered that he was obviously able to see despite his unfocused pupils.

“So, how was the trip?” Lanna asked.

“Fine,” Jason said tersely, walking down the shuttle’s hallway and nodding toward the captain. The man ran a good crew—in Jason’s opinion, any crew that left him alone was a good one.

“Come on,” Lanna prodded in his ear. “It had to be more than just ‘fine.’ What kind of food did they serve? Did you have any problems with the . . .” She droned on, but Jason stopped paying attention. He was focused on something else—a slight warble in Lanna’s voice. It sounded for only a brief second, but Jason immediately knew what it meant. The line was being tapped.

Lanna had undoubtedly heard it as well—she was loquacious, but not incompetent—but she continued as if nothing had happened. She would wait for Jason’s signal.

“How are the kids?” Jason asked.

“My nephews?” Lanna replied, not breaking the rhythm of her conversation as she received his coded request. “The older one’s fine, but the younger one has the flu.”

The younger one was sick. That meant the tap was on Jason’s end, not hers. *Interesting*, he thought. Someone had managed to get close enough to scan his control disk without him noticing.

Lanna fell silent. She was preparing a tap block, but would only act if Jason ordered it. He didn’t.

Instead, he stepped out of the shuttle and walked down the short ramp to the arrival station. Before him spread a line of scanning arches, meant to search for weaponry. Jason strode through them without concern—there wasn’t a scanner in human space that could discover his weapons. He nodded with a smile as he passed a guard; the man smelled faintly of tobacco and was wearing a blue uniform that registered as a pulsing rhythm in Jason’s mind. The guard frowned as he saw the silver PC pin on Jason’s lapel, then turned a suspicious eye on his scanners.

Jason stepped aside as the other passengers formed a line at the registration counter, ostensibly searching for his ID. He watched them with his Sense, however, his useless eyes turned downward. Most of the people wore the soft rhythm of navy, the roar of white, or the still silence of black. None of them stood out, but he memorized the patterns of their faces. The person who had tapped his line must have been on the shuttle.

After they had all passed, Jason pretended to find his ID—one of the old plastic ones, rather than a new holovid card. A tired security man, his breath smelling of coffee, accepted the ID and began processing Jason’s papers. The guard was a young man, and his skin was tinted blue after one of the newer fashion trends. The man worked slowly, and Jason’s eyes drifted to a holovid playing on the back counter. It displayed a news program.

“. . . found murdered in an incineration building,” the anchor said.

Jason snapped upright.

“Jason,” Lanna’s voice said urgently in his ear. “I just picked something up on the newsfeeds. There’s been a—”

“I know,” Jason said, accepting his ID back and dashing out of the customs station and onto the street.

Captain Orson Ansed, Evensong PD, hustled through Topside's slums. It still surprised him that Evensong had slums. All of the platform's buildings were built of rich telanium, a super-light, silvery metal that didn't corrode or fall apart. In fact, most of the buildings had been prefabricated with the platform and were an extension of its sheet-like hull. The buildings were spacious, well-constructed, and sleek.

And still there were slums. It didn't matter that Evensong's poor lived in homes that many wealthy Earthsiders couldn't afford. By comparison, they were still poor. Somehow, their dwellings reflected that. There was a sense of despair to the area. Shiny, modern buildings were hung with ragged drapes and drying clothing. Aircars were rare, pedestrians common.

"Over here, captain," one of his men said, motioning toward a building. It was long and squat—though like all buildings on the platform, it had other structures built on top of it. The officer, a new kid named Ken Harris, led Orson inside, and Orson was immediately struck by a pungent smoky scent. The building was a burning station, where organic materials were recycled.

Officers moved about in the darkened room. Like most buildings on Evensong, this one was poorly lit. Evensong's distance from the sun kept it in a perpetual state of twilight, and the platform's inhabitants had grown accustomed to having less light. Many of them kept the lights dim even indoors. The tendency had bothered Orson at first, but he rarely even noticed it anymore.

Several officers saluted, and Orson waved them down with a petulant gesture. "What've we got here?"

"Come and look, sir," Harris said, weaving through some equipment toward the back of the room.

Orson followed; eventually they stopped beside a massive cylindrical burner. Its metallic face was dark and flat. One of the bottom reservoir doors was open, revealing the dust below. Mixed with the dirt and ash was a large section of carapace, its shell stained black from the heat.

Orson swore quietly, kneeling beside the carapace. He poked at the shell with a stirring rod. "I assume this is our missing ambassador?"

"That is what we assume, sir," Harris said.

Great, Orson thought with a sigh. The Varvax had been asking about their ambassador since its disappearance two weeks before.

"What do we know?" Orson asked.

"Not much," Harris said. "These burners are only emptied once a month. The carapace has been in there for some time—there's almost nothing left of it. Any longer, and we wouldn't have even found him."

That might have been preferable, Orson thought. "What did the sensor net record?"

"Nothing," Harris said.

"Does the media know about this?" Orson asked hopefully.

“I’m afraid so, sir,” Harris said. “The worker who found the body leaked the information.”

Orson sighed. “All right, then, let’s . . .”

He trailed off. A figure was silhouetted in the building’s open door—a figure not wearing a police uniform. Orson swore quietly, standing. The officers outside were supposed to keep the press out.

“I’m sorry,” Orson said, walking toward the intruder, “but this area is restricted. You can’t . . .”

The man ignored him. He was tall and thin, with a triangular face and short-cropped black hair. He wore a simple black suit, a little outdated but otherwise indistinctive, and a pair of dark glasses. He brushed past Orson with an air of indifference.

Orson reached out to grab the insolent stranger, but froze. There was a gleaming pin on the man’s lapel—a small silver bell.

What! Orson thought with amazement. *When did a PC operative get here? How did he know?* The questions didn’t really matter—regardless of their answers, one thing was certain. Orson’s jurisdiction had come to an end.

The Phone Company had arrived.

It had finally happened a hundred and forty years before, in the year 2071. Oddly enough, the ones who had made first contact had been an outdated, nearly bankrupt phone company.

Northern Bell Incorporated had been on the losing side of technological progress. While its competitors had been researching and incorporating holovid technology, Northern Bell had tried something a little more daring: cybernetic-based telepathic linking.

Cyto, as it was dubbed, had turned out to be a failure. Holovid technology was not only cheaper and more stable, it also worked. Cyto had not worked—at least not as Northern Bell had hoped. In the last days before its impending bankruptcy, the company had finally managed to get a few squeaks of sound through the system. Those squeaks, while unimpressive to their human monitors, were also inadvertently projected through space to a group of beings known as the Tenasi. The Tenasi reply had been the first interspecies contact Earth had ever known.

Second contact had been made by the United Governments Military when they accidentally shot down a Tenasi ambassadorial vessel. But that, of course, was an entirely different story.

“He’s been missing for two weeks?” Jason asked, kneeling beside the burned carapace. It was silent in his mind—a foreboding indication of its black color.

“Yes, sir,” the officer said.

“Yup,” Lanna said at almost the same time.

“Why wasn’t I informed of this?” Jason asked.

The police officer looked confused for a moment before realizing that Jason wasn’t talking to him. Earlinks were a common, if confusing, part of modern life.

“I assumed you knew, old man,” Lanna said. “You know, Jason, for an all-knowing spy type, you’re remarkably uninformed.”

Jason grunted, standing. She was right—he should have looked into local news stories during his trip. It was too late now.

The officer regarded Jason with hard eyes. Jason could read the man’s emotions easily. Not through the use of his Cyto Senses—it was a common misconception that psionics were telepathic. No, Jason could read the man’s emotions because he was accustomed to dealing with local law enforcement. The officer would be annoyed at Jason for interfering with his investigation. But at the same time, the officer would be relieved. Local men always felt overwhelmed when it came to dealing with other species. Aliens were to be handled by the Phone Company. The PC had made first contact; the PC had negotiated Earth out of danger following the Tenasi incident. The PC had brought FTL communication to humankind.

So the officer watched Jason—jealous, but thankful. Jason could hear other officers muttering at the edges of the room, angry at his interference. *Dirty PC. Why is he here? Why does he look at us like that? Can’t you see? What’s that in front of your face? Is it my fist? Can you see it if I hit you? Maybe that will—*

“Jason?” Lanna’s voice sounded in his ear.

Jason snapped to, muscles twitching, memories fading. He still knelt beside the burner. The officer still stood staring at him, the room still smelled overpoweringly of smoke, and he could still hear the reporters arguing with officers outside.

“I’m all right,” Jason whispered.

He stood, dusting off his suit, listening to the reporters. They, like the policemen, would probably assume that Jason had come to Evensong to investigate the Ambassador’s death. It didn’t matter that Jason’s shuttle had left for Evensong over a month before the murder. An alien had died, and a PC operative had arrived. That would be enough for them.

“I shouldn’t have come to the scene,” he mumbled.

“What else would you have done?” Lanna asked. “This is our duty, after all.”

“Not mine,” Jason said. “I’m here to retrieve a missing scientist, not investigate a murder.” Then, speaking louder, he continued. “I’m certain the local law enforcement is competent. Let them investigate—the PC can handle diplomatic negotiations.”

The officer looked surprised. But, apparently uncertain what else to do, he saluted Jason. Jason nodded, then turned to leave.

“Not that the ‘diplomatic negotiations’ will be too hard,” Lanna noted. “The Varvax are so insanely docile that they’ll probably apologize for inconveniencing one of our murderers.”

“They’re all like that,” Jason said, stepping out onto the building’s front steps. “That’s the big problem, isn’t it?”

There was a moment of shocked silence as the reporters realized who he was. They stood in a ring around several beleaguered police, and the commotion was attracting a crowd of curious onlookers. Then the reporters exploded with questions. Jason ignored them, pushing his way

through the crowd. He had his head bowed, his hand raised to forestall questions. However, in his mind he was looking.

He scanned the crowd, pushing through the humming and pulsing colors. He looked over each face, comparing them to the ones in his memory. A smile crept to his lips as he found what he was looking for. The media let him leave—they were used to the PC ignoring their questions. Behind him, Jason could hear their on-the-spot vidcasts. They had all the facts wrong, of course. There was fear in their voices—a fear of what they didn't understand, a fear of the retribution that might come. In their world, retribution was assumed. In their world, you hurt that which was weaker than you.

Jason continued to walk with his head bowed. Behind him, a man broke free from the group of onlookers and wandered in Jason's direction, obviously trying to look casual.

"I wish there were more flowers," Jason said.

A second later, a click sounded in his ear. Then Lanna sighed. "What took you so long?" she demanded. "I've been waiting for you to do that ever since you got off the shuttle. I feel creepy knowing someone's hacking our line."

Jason continued to stroll forward. His shadow followed—the man moved with the skill of one who had been well trained, but he made the mistakes of one who was inexperienced. There was no change to his step—he probably hadn't noticed the switchover. At that moment, he would be listening to a fabricated conversation between Lanna and Jason. For some reason, Jason suspected he didn't want to know what kind of silly things Lanna's replicated version of his voice was saying.

"Is he buying it?" Lanna asked.

"I think so," Jason said, walking away from the slums. "He's still following."

"Who do you think he's with?"

"I'm not sure yet." Jason turned, taking the steps down into an airtrain station. The man followed.

"If you caught him this quickly, he must not be very good."

"He's young," Jason said. "He knows what he's supposed to do, but he doesn't know how to do it."

"A reporter," Lanna guessed.

"No," Jason said. "He's too well equipped. Remember, he managed to hack into a secure FTL comm."

"One of the corporations?"

"Maybe," Jason said, strolling into an underground cafe. It smelled of dirt, mold, and coffee. His follower waited for a few moments outside, then walked in and took a table a discrete distance from Jason.

Jason ordered a cup of coffee.

“We haven’t even discussed how he managed to scan your disk,” Lanna noted. “You’re losing your edge, old man.”

“I’m not old,” Jason mumbled as the waitress brought his coffee. It smelled of cream, though he had ordered it black. He turned his ineffectual eyes on a newspaper someone else had left on the table, but his mind studied his follower. The man was indeed young—in his early twenties. He wore softly humming grays and browns.

“So,” Lanna said, “do you want to try and get me a visual so I can look him up?”

Jason paused. “No,” he finally said, taking a sip of his coffee. It had far too much cream in it—probably an attempt to obscure its poor flavor.

“Well, what are you going to do?”

“Be patient,” Jason chided.

Coln Abrams sipped his coffee—it didn’t have enough cream. He had to keep telling himself not to look at his target. Coln didn’t actually need to watch the man to monitor the conversation, he just had to stay within range.

What are you doing here, Write? Coln wondered with frustration. How did you know the ambassador would be killed? What does this all have to do with your plans?

Coln shook his head. Jason Write, head operative for Northern Bell Phone Company, one of the most enigmatic people in the Solar System. What was he doing on Evensong? The United Intelligence Bureau knew a lot about the man, but for every known fact there seemed to be two more missing.

Take, for instance, the Tenasi Agreement. Coln had read the document itself a hundred times, and had watched the holovids, commentaries, and old newscasts relating to the Tenasi incident over and over. The United Governments military had accidentally shot down a Tenasi diplomatic vessel—thereby initiating a rather embarrassing first contact. Earth had been thrown into a chaos of confusion and worry. Were they being invaded? Would they be invaded now that they had made such a horrible mistake?

Then the PC had stepped in. Somehow—using means they had yet to explain—they had contacted the Tenasi. The PC had brought peace to Earth. But in exchange, the company had demanded a steep price. From that moment on, the PC had become completely autonomous—untaxable, unquestionable, and completely above the law. In addition, the PC had secured sole rights to the aliens’ FTL communication technology. And, with those two concessions, the PC had become the most powerful, most arrogant force in the system.

Coln gripped his mug tightly, barely noticing as the waitress brought his sandwich. He was still listening to the conversation between Write and his Base Support Operative—they were discussing what color roses they liked best.

Coln had never trusted the PC—and he hated things he couldn’t trust. The PC grew fat off its treaties—it held exclusive contracts with all twelve alien races humankind had met. The alien

races all refused to deal with Earth unless they went through the PC first. The Phone Company kept humankind locked in space, refusing to share FTL travel technology. It claimed that the aliens had yet to give it to them. Coln suspected the truth. The aliens had FTL travel, that was certain. The PC was simply keeping it from humankind, and that infuriated Coln. He wanted to find—

Coln froze. The conversation in his ear had stopped mid-sentence. For a panicked moment, Coln feared that Write had slipped out of the restaurant and out of range.

Coln's eyes darted across the room. He was relieved to find Write sitting in his booth, sipping quietly at his coffee. It had simply been a lull in the conversation.

"What do you think he'll do when he realizes his cover is blown?" the Base Support Operative, Lanna, said in Coln's ear.

Coln paused.

"I don't know." Jason Write's voice was firm. Arrogant. Coln could see Write's lips moving as he spoke. "I suspect he will be surprised. He's young—he assumes he's better than he really is."

Write looked up, his sunglassed eyes looking directly at Coln's face. Horror rose in Coln's chest, an emotion quickly followed by shame. He'd been discovered.

"Come here, boy," Write ordered in Coln's ear.

Coln shot a look at the door. He could probably get away—

"If you leave," Write said, "then you will never discover why I am on Evensong." His voice was sharp and businesslike.

Coln regarded the man indecisively. What should he do? Why hadn't any of his classes covered situations like this one? When an agent was discovered, he was supposed to pull out. But what if his target seemed willing to talk to him?

Slowly, Coln rose and crossed the cafe's dirty floor. Write's sunglasses watched him quietly. Coln stood for a moment beside Write's table, then sat stiffly.

Don't reveal anything, Coln warned himself. *Don't let him know that you're with the—*

"You are young for a UIB agent," Write said.

Inwardly, Coln sighed. *He already knows. What have I gotten myself—and the Bureau—into?*

"I wonder," Write said, taking a sip of his coffee. "Is the Bureau growing more confident in its young agents, or am I simply slipping in priority?"

He doesn't know! Coln realized with surprise. *He thinks I'm here officially.*

"Neither," Coln said, thinking quickly. "We weren't ready for you to leave. I was the only field agent who was unassigned at the time. It was simply poor luck."

Write nodded to himself.

He accepted it!

"I must say," Write said, setting down his mug, "I am growing tired of the UIB. Every time I think that you people are going to leave me alone, I find myself being followed again."

“If the PC weren’t so untrustworthy,” Coln said, “its Operatives wouldn’t have to worry about being followed.”

“If the Bureau weren’t so poor at investigation,” Write said, “it would have realized by now that the PC is the only company that the Bureau *can* trust.”

Coln flushed. “Are you going to say something useful, or are you just going to insult me?”

“A clever man would realize that my insults contain the most useful information you’ll likely receive,” Write said.

Coln snorted, rising from the chair. Write had just invited him over to gloat, and Coln had ruined his own career for nothing. He had been so certain that he could tail Write, that he could figure out what the man was doing, discover truth behind the Tenasi Agreement. . . .

“You may accompany me,” Write said, finishing his coffee.

Coln paused mid-step. “What?”

Write set down his mug. “You want to know what I’m doing? Well, you may come with me. Maybe this will finally alleviate the UIB’s foolish suspicions. I’m tired of being followed.”

“Jason,” Lanna said in Coln’s ear. “Are you certain—”

“No,” Write said. “I’m not. However, I don’t have time to deal with the UIB right now. This is a simple mission—the boy may come with me if he wishes.”

Coln stood, dumbfounded. He couldn’t decide what to do. Could he really trust a PC operative? No, he couldn’t. But what if he learned something important? “I—”

“Hush,” Write said suddenly, holding up a hand.

Coln frowned. Write wasn’t looking at him, however. He was staring straight ahead, his face confused.

Now what? Coln wondered.

Something was wrong. Jason ran his mind around the room, trying to Sense what was bothering him. The cafe had about a dozen other occupants, all eating quietly. Most of them were in workers’ clothing—flannels and denim that pulsed an irregular symphony in Jason’s mind. He studied their faces, and recognized none of them. What was bothering him?

A line of bullets blasted through the window just beside Jason. They came far too fast for his body to react or dodge, moving with the incredible speed of modern weaponry.

As fast as the bullets were, however, Jason’s mind was faster. He whipped out, a dozen invisible mindblades slashing through the air. The force of his attack slapped the bullets backward as well as sliced each one in two. There was a series of audible clicks as the pieces bounced back off the window, then fell to the cafe floor. All was silent.

The UIB kid plopped into his seat, his face horrified as he stared at the window and its holes.

“Jason?” Lanna said urgently. “Jason, what happened?”

Jason sensed out the window, but the sniper was already gone. “I don’t know.”

“Someone shot at you?” Lanna asked with concern.

Jason regarded the bullet holes—they ran in a small circle in the window just beside the UIB kid’s head. “No,” he said. “They tried to kill the kid.”

The cafe’s patrons were running about in fear, some calling out, others hiding beneath benches. The UIB kid was looking down at himself with surprise, as if he couldn’t believe that he was still alive. “They all missed,” the boy whispered with amazement.

Jason frowned. Why would someone try to kill a UIB agent? Why not focus on Jason? The PC was a far more dangerous threat.

“How did you let him sneak up on you like that?” Lanna asked.

“I wasn’t expecting to be shot at. This was supposed to be a simple assignment.” Then, turning to the kid, he nodded. “Let’s go.”

The kid looked up with surprise. “Someone tried to kill me! Why?”

“I’m not certain,” Jason said. He ran his Sense over the room one last time, memorizing faces. As he did so, he noticed something. While most of the people were hiding or quivering in fear, one didn’t seem to be concerned at all. A solitary form sat quietly at the back of the cafe. He was a nondescript man with a long nose and a firm body. He watched Jason with interested eyes—eyes that seemed slightly unfocused. Almost as if . . .

Impossible! Jason thought. Then, without bothering to see if the UIB kid followed him, he left the cafe.

“You must take the apologies of us,” Sonn urged. The Varvax Foreign Minister’s words were delivered by a translation program, of course—the Varvax language consisted of clicks and snaps mitigated by hand gestures. The figure on the holovid screen was large and boxy, and its skin shone with quartz and granite. That was, of course, only the exoskeleton—the Varvax were actually small creatures that floated in a nutrient bath sealed within their inorganic shells.

“Sonn,” Jason pointed out, sitting back in his chair, “your people were the victims here. Your ambassador was murdered.”

Sonn waved a clawlike hand; a symbol of denial. “You must understand that he knew the risks of living in an undeveloped civilization. Creatures of lesser intelligence cannot be held responsible for their acts of barbarity. You have not yet learned a better way.”

Jason smiled to himself. Comments like that one that earned the Varvax, and most other alien races, humankind’s disgust. It didn’t matter that the comments were true—in fact, the truth of such statements only enraged humankind more.

“We will return what is left of the body as soon as possible, Minister Sonn,” Jason promised.

“Thank you, Jason of the Phone Company. You must tell to me—how go your efforts at civilization? Will your people soon raise themselves to Primary Intelligence?”

“It will take some time yet, Minister Sonn,” Jason said.

“You are an interesting people, Jason of the Phone Company,” Sonn said, his claws held before him in a gesture of supplication.

“You may speak on.”

“You have such disparity amongst what you are,” Sonn said. “Some of Primary Intelligence, some of Third -or even Fourth- Intelligence. Such disparity. You must tell to me; are your people still convinced of the power of technology?”

Jason shrugged an exaggerated shrug—the Varvax liked to watch and interpret human gestures. “Humankind believes in technology, Minister Sonn. It will be very difficult for them to accept another way.”

“Of course, Jason of the Phone Company. We will speak to each other again.”

“We will speak again,” Jason said, shutting off the holovid. He sat for a moment, Sensing the room around him. He couldn’t just relax completely anymore—he missed that. If he let his concentration lapse, the darkness would come upon him.

“They certainly are confident, aren’t they?” Lanna asked in his ear.

“They have reason to be,” Jason replied. “It has always happened as they expect. A race discovers FTL Cytonic Transmission at the same time it achieves a peaceful civilization.”

“If only they weren’t so cursed ingenuous,” Lanna said. “A part of me kind of wishes I had three Varvax diplomats, a card table, and a host of ‘useless’ technologies I could cheat out of them.”

“That’s the problem,” Jason said. “There’s a little of that in all of us.”

“What if they’re wrong, Jason?” Lanna asked. “What if we do get FTL travel before we’re ‘civilized’?”

Jason didn’t reply—he didn’t know the answer.

“I looked up the kid for you,” Lanna offered.

“Go on,” Jason said, rising and gathering his things. The attack the day before still had him worried. Was it an attempt to scare Jason off? From what? “The day you left, a young UIB agent named Coln Abrams disappeared from the Bureau’s training facilities on Jupiter Fourteen,” Lanna said. “He stole some sophisticated monitoring equipment. The UIB put out several warrants for him, but they aren’t looking this far—apparently they didn’t expect him to make it all the way to Evensong.”

“It isn’t exactly a prime vacation spot,” Jason noted, strolling over to the window and trying to imagine what the city would look like to normal eyes. It would be dark, he decided—most of it didn’t vibrate very much to him. Dark and tall, like a city constructed entirely of alleyways. Lights were sparse and insufficient, and the air always smelled musty. It always seemed to be a few degrees below standard temperature too—as if the vacuum of space were closer, more ominous, than it really was.

“So,” Lanna said, “we’ve got a wanted felon. Can we turn him in?”

“No,” Jason said, turning from the window. He put on his suit coat and slid on his dark glasses.

“Come on, let’s turn him in,” Lanna said. “In fact, it was probably the UIB who tried to have him killed yesterday.”

“They don’t work that way,” Jason said, walking to the door. “Do you have my permits secured?”

“Yes,” Lanna said.

“Good. Turn the kid back on, and let’s get going.”

The image was blurred and poorly exposed. Unfortunately, it was the best he had. Coln walked around the large holoimage, studying it as he had hundreds of times before. The answer was before him; he could feel it. The image held a secret. Yet Coln, like thousands of others, was unable to determine just what that secret might be.

The image had been taken by the only spy to infiltrate the PC’s central headquarters. It was a picture of a simple white room with an apparatus lining the back wall. That apparatus, whatever it was, powered all of humankind’s FTL communications.

It was the greatest secret of the modern age. Humankind had been trying for nearly two centuries to break the PC’s monopoly on FTL communication. Unfortunately, no amount of research had been able to duplicate the PC’s strange technology—and until someone did, humankind would be indebted to a tyrant.

It has to be here! Coln thought, staring at the unyielding image. He walked around it to look at several angles. *If only it weren’t so blurry.* He looked closely at the holoimage. A security guard sat against the right side of the room, staring in the photographer’s direction. There seemed to be several cylindrical outcroppings on the far wall—relays of some kind? One was larger than the others, and dark in color. Was it the answer?

Coln sighed. Men far more technologically savvy than he had tried to dissect the image, but none had been able to draw any decisive conclusions. The picture was just too fuzzy to be of much use. He had spent the entire morning trying to decide why someone would try to kill him. He had only been able to come to one decision—that for some reason, Write had ordered him assassinated. The PC agent had been the one who had coerced Coln over to sit beside him, in the place where the assassin had shot. The PC was behind it somehow. *Except the assassin missed,* Coln thought. *He must have done so on purpose. Write wanted to scare me off. He acted like he didn’t care if I followed him, then he tried to frighten me away.* Coln nodded. It made sense, in a twisted PC sort of way. And if Write didn’t want him along, then Coln had to make certain he stayed.

“Wake up, kid,” Lanna’s voice crackled suddenly in his ear.

“I’m awake,” Coln said, bristling at the reference to his age—twenty-three was hardly young enough to earn him the title of “kid.” At least the other two had stopped feeding him dummy conversations—when they didn’t want him to listen, they simply shut him out completely.

“The big guy’s leaving,” Lanna said in her pert voice. Coln was beginning to wonder why Write put up with her. “He says you can go with him, but only if you can keep up.”

Coln cursed, throwing on his jacket.

“Oh, and Coln,” Lanna said, “try not to steal anything from him. Jason’s kind of attached to his equipment.”

Coln flushed. How much did they know?

He dashed out into the hallway just in time to see Write’s black-suited form turn a corner. Coln padded across the floor, catching up to the operative. Write barely acknowledged him. They walked in silence to the end of the hallway, then took the private lift down to the lobby. The lush carpets and wealthy furnishings hinted that they were far indeed from the previous day’s slums.

“So, what is it?” Coln asked as they stepped out onto the silver telanium street. The street, as always, was dimly lit—though hundreds of lights shone from windows and signs. Evensong was dark, but it did not sleep.

“What is what?” Write asked as an aircab—obviously chartered—pulled up in front of the hotel.

“What is your purpose here, Write?” Coln asked, climbing into the back of the car beside the operative. “I assume you knew something about the ambassador’s death?”

“You assume wrong,” Write said as the aircab began to move. “The ambassador’s murder was a coincidence.”

Coln raised an eyebrow in skepticism.

“Believe me or not, I don’t really care.”

“Then why are you here?” Coln asked.

Write sighed. “Tell him.”

“It happened just under two months ago, kid,” Lanna said. “A scientist named Denise Carlson disappeared from Evensong’s PC research facility.”

Coln frowned at the comment, searching through his memory. He paid attention to anything the Bureau learned about the PC. He recalled something about the scientist’s disappearance, but it hadn’t seemed very important.

“But,” Coln said, “our reports said she was nothing more than a lab assistant. The PC home office barely paid any mind to her disappearance—it said that she had been the victim of a common street mugging.”

“Well, at least someone pays attention to current events,” Lanna said.

Write snorted. “He might pay attention, but he should have realized that any story we downplay is far more important than it seems.”

Coln blushed. “So, you came to find this Denise Carlson?”

“Wrong,” Lanna said. “That’s why he left, but that’s not the goal anymore. While Jason was in transit, we located Miss Carlson. Just under two weeks ago a woman fitting her description was

picked up by authorities. She was diagnosed with severe mental problems, and was checked into a local treatment ward.”

“So . . .” Coln said.

“So I’m here to retrieve her,” Write said. “Nothing more. We’re going to bring her back to Jupiter Fourteen so that she can receive proper treatment. My role is that of a simple courier.” Write smiled slightly, turning his black glasses toward Coln. “That is why I am willing to let you come with me. You sacrificed your career so you could watch me escort a mental patient.”

Jason strode into the hospital, the depressed Coln tagging along behind. The kid kept asking questions, convinced that Jason’s actions had some greater purpose in the PC’s “master plans.” Jason was beginning to regret bringing him along—the last thing he needed was another person jabbering at him.

The nurse at the front desk looked up with surprise when he entered, her eyes flickering toward his silver lapel pin.

“Mr. Flippenday?” she asked.

He paused only briefly at the horrid name. “I am. Show me to the patient.”

The nurse nodded, leaving the desk to another attendant and waving Jason to follow. She wore white—a roaring, blatant color. To others, White was neutral, but to Jason it was by far the most garish choice. Better the subtle hum of gray. The walls were white as well, and the hallways smelled of cleaning fluids.

Why do they do that? Jason wondered, shaking his head slightly. *Do they think that it will make their patients feel at home? Lifeless sterility and monochrome white? Perhaps all these people need to regain their sanity is a little bit of color.*

The nurse led them to a simple room with a locked door—ostensibly for the patient’s safety.

“I’m glad you finally decided to come,” the nurse said, a slightly chiding tone in her voice. “We contacted the PC weeks ago, and the woman’s just been waiting here all this time. With no relatives on the platform, one would think that you people . . .”

She trailed off as Jason turned toward her. After losing his eyesight, he had eventually learned that a look of discontent could be accomplished as much with one’s bearing as with one’s eyes. As he stared sightlessly at the nurse, her resolve weakened, and the punitive tone left her voice.

“That is enough,” Jason said simply.

“Yes, sir,” the nurse mumbled, shooting him a spiteful look as she unlocked the door.

Jason walked into the small, unadorned room. Denise sat beside a desk—the room’s only furniture beside a bed and a dresser. She regarded Jason with wide eyes. She looked much as in his holovid—she was thin, her short dark hair in curls, and she wore a simple skirt and blouse.

Jason had met her several times before—Denise had shown an affinity for Cyto, and had been midway through her training. She had once been a straightforward and calculating woman. Now she looked like a young squirrel that hadn't yet learned to fear predators.

"They said you would come," she whispered, the words awkward in her mouth. "Do you know who I am?"

Jason looked toward the nurse.

"She's amnesiac," the nurse said. "Though we can't determine any physical reason for it. She also has some sort of muscular problem—she has trouble keeping her balance and controlling her limbs."

Denise demonstrated such, rising slowly to her feet. She wobbled slightly as she walked forward, but she managed to remain on her feet.

"She's made amazing progress," the nurse said. "She can walk now if she doesn't move too quickly."

"Denise, you're coming with me," Jason said. "Abrams, help her walk."

The kid looked up with surprise. Jason didn't give him time to complain—instead, Jason turned and strode from the room. Abrams cursed quietly, but did as he ordered, giving the confused Denise a helpful arm as they walked from the hospital.

They were nearly out when Jason noticed something. He never would have seen it without his Sense—the man hid behind a door, barely peeking out. The Sense was far more discerning than normal eyes, however, and Jason recognized the face even through the door's small slit. It was one of the men from the cafe—not the strange man who had sat at the booth, but one of the ordinary workers.

So, they've been watching her, Jason thought as he left the building, the kid and Denise following. *Did they expect her to reveal something, or did they know that I would come for her?*

"I do not know what this means," Denise said, staring at the menu with her wide eyes. She looked up, confused.

"You can't read?" Jason asked.

"No," Denise replied.

"Here, let me help," Abrams offered, reading down the list of items.

Jason sat back, allowing himself a slight smile. The kid was showing an almost chivalrous devotion to the amnesiac woman. She was passably attractive, in a sickeningly innocent sort of way. Abrams was just betraying the inherent predisposition of a young human male; he had seen a woman in need and was trying to help her.

Denise raised her hand awkwardly in an odd gesture as Coln read. "I still do not know what it means."

“None of the words sound familiar?” Jason asked, leaning forward with interest.

“No.”

“But you can speak,” Jason mused. “What do you remember?”

“Nothing,” Denise said. “I don’t remember anything, Mr. Flippenday.”

Jason cringed. “Call me Jason,” he mumbled as Abrams asked the girl what kind of food she liked. She, of course, didn’t know.

She should have remembered more. Most amnesiacs remembered something—if only fragments.

“What do you think?” Jason whispered.

“It’s odd,” Lanna said. “She’s changed, old man. Whatever they did to her, it was pretty thorough.”

“Agreed.”

Abrams ordered for the girl and himself—choosing, Jason noticed, two of the most expensive items on the menu. He knew that Jason would be paying. At least the kid had style.

As he sat, Jason thought back to the strange man in the cafe. The man couldn’t have access to Cyto—in a hundred and fifty years, no one had discovered the ability besides the PC. But what if someone had? What if they had learned about Denise, and had captured her to try and learn what she knew? What had they done to her to get at her knowledge?

His ponderings led him nowhere. Eventually the food came, and Jason began to eat. He preferred simple meals with little mess, so he had ordered a tossed pasta dish with a very light sauce. He ate quietly, thoughtful as he watched a man a short distance away haggle over his bill with the waiter.

He shouldn’t have been worried about the ambassador’s death. The police would probably find that the murder had been preformed by some xenophobic activist group. They were prevalent. There were those who hated other species because of assumed superiority, those who hated them because they thought the aliens were too arrogant, and those who hated them simply because they were different. The student-sponsorship program, where human children would be sent to other planets to learn of other species, had been defeated three times in the United Senate.

The ambassador’s death probably wasn’t related to Denise. Jason should leave—there were too many things that demanded his attention for him to waste time chasing false leads. This trip had taken far too long already.

Jason paused. Denise had turned and was staring at the man who was arguing about his bill. He raised his fist at the waiter, uttering a few epithets, then finally slapped down some money and stalked out of the building.

“Why is he like that?” Denise asked? “How can he be so angry?”

“That’s just the way people are sometimes,” Coln said uncomfortably. “How is your food?”

Denise turned her eyes down at the steak. She had taken several awkward bites, though Coln had been forced to cut it for her. “It’s very . . .”

“Very what?” Jason prompted.

“I do not know,” Denise confessed, blushing. “It tastes too . . . strong. One of the flavors is very odd.”

Jason frowned. “What flavor?”

“I do not know. It was very strong in the hospital’s food too, though I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to offend them.”

“Describe the taste to me,” Jason said. Something was tickling at the back of his mind—a connection he should have made.

“Leave her alone, old man,” Abrams said. “She’s been through a lot.”

Jason raised his eyebrows at the use of ‘old man.’ He heard Lanna chuckling through the FTL link. Jason ignored Abrams, turning his head toward Denise. “Describe the taste to me.”

“I can’t,” Denise finally said. “You must understand—I don’t know what it is.”

Jason reached for the saltshaker, then sprinkled some salt on his hand. “Taste this,” he ordered.

She did as asked, then nodded. “That’s it. I do not like it very much.”

Abrams rolled his eyes. “You’ve figured out that she doesn’t know the word for salty. So? She doesn’t know what any of these foods are, or even what her name is.”

Jason sat back, ignoring the kid. Then he turned to his food and continued to eat in silence.

“I’ve arranged your return trip to Jupiter,” Lanna said. “You’ll be leaving on the courier ship *Excel* at 10:30 PM, local time.”

Jason nodded to himself. He stood on his balcony, leaning against the railing as he listened to Lanna’s voice in his ear.

“The ship is a good one, and always punctual—as you like them,” Lanna said. “Your accommodations are for two people.”

Jason didn’t reply. He Sensed Evensong before him, feeling its massive metallic buildings and numerous walkways. Sometimes, he tried to remember what it had been like to see. He tried to imagine colors as images, rather than as Cytonic vibrations, but he had trouble. It had been so long, and his eyes hadn’t been very good in the first place.

Evensong was in motion around him—aircars flew, people moved on the walkways, lights flickered on and off. It was beautiful, in a way. It was beautiful that humankind had expanded this far, that it had found a way to thrive even here, in the middle of space, where the sun was barely more than another star.

“You’re not coming back yet, are you?” Lanna asked quietly.

“No.”

“So you think the ambassador’s death might be related?”

“I’m not certain,” Jason said. “Maybe. Something is bothering me, Lanna.”

“About the murder?” she asked.

“No. About our scientist. Something about Denise is . . . wrong.”

“What?”

Jason paused. “I’m not sure. She learned to walk and talk too quickly, for one thing.”

Lanna didn’t respond immediately. “I’m not certain what to tell you,” she finally said.

Jason sighed, shaking his head. He didn’t really understand what he meant either. He stood quietly for a moment, watching the flow of people on a walkway a short distance away. Something was wrong—he couldn’t decide what it was, but he knew what he feared. For over a century, the PC had maintained a monopoly on Cyto. He didn’t expect psychic ability to remain confined to the PC—in fact, it was his ultimate goal that it not be. The very thing he was working toward was what he feared.

“Jason,” Lanna asked, “have you ever worried that what we’re doing is wrong?”

“Every day.”

“I mean,” Lanna continued, “what if they’re right? The Tenasi, the Varvax, and the rest—they’re all much older than humankind is. They know more than we do. Maybe they’re right—maybe humankind will become civilized before it obtains FTL travel. Maybe by holding Cyto back from them, we’re keeping ourselves from progressing as we should.”

Jason stood quietly beside the balcony, listening to the sound of children running on the walkway below. *Children, laughing . . .*

“Lanna,” he said, “do you know how the Interspecies Monitoring Coalition rates a race’s intelligence class?”

“No.”

“They look at the race’s children,” Jason said quietly. “The older ones. Children who have lived just long enough to begin imitating the society they see around them, children who have lost the innocence of youth but haven’t yet replaced it with the tact and mores of adulthood. In those children, you can see what a species is really like. From them, the Varvax determine whether a species is civilized or barbaric.”

“And we failed that test,” Lanna said.

“Miserably.”

“That’s all right,” Lanna said. “Every race fails it during the early part of their growth. We’ll get there eventually.”

“The Tenasi had barely begun using steam power when they made their first FTL jump,” Jason said. “The Varvax weren’t far behind them—they still didn’t have computers. Both species traveled to other planets before they learned to send a shuttle into space.”

Lanna fell quiet.

“We’ve been in space for nearly three centuries now,” Jason continued. “The Varvax say that technology isn’t the way—they claim that technological development has boundaries, but that a sentient mind is limitless. But . . . still I worry. I worry that humankind will find a way, somehow. We always have before.”

“And so you play watchdog,” Lanna said.

Jason stood for a moment. “The few, so cleans’d, to these abodes repair,” he finally said in a quiet voice, “And breathe, in ample fields, the soft Elysian air. Then are they happy, when by length of time, The scurf is worn away of each committed crime; No speck is left of their habitual stains, But the pure ether of the soul remains.”

“Homer?” Lanna asked.

“Virgil.” Above, beyond the buildings, beyond the air, Jason could Sense the specks of starlight in the sky. “Space is Elysium, Lanna. The place where heroes go when they die. The Varvax and the others, they’ve fought and bled, just like we have. They finally overcame all of that—they paid their price and have earned their peace. I want to make certain their paradise remains such.”

“By playing God?”

Jason fell silent. He didn’t know how to reply, so he didn’t. He simply stood, Sensing the paradise above and Evensong below.

Coln rifled through the in-room bar, searching for something to drink. He wasn’t normally prone to drinking, but normally he wasn’t facing the loss of his job and probable imprisonment. Eventually, he poured himself a small glass of scotch and made his way out onto the balcony.

He paused halfway out the door. Jason Write stood leaning on his own balcony just a short distance away. The man didn’t look over, but Coln still felt as if he were being watched.

Don’t let him intimidate you, Coln told himself. He turned away from Write indifferently and leaned against his own balcony railing.

Coming after Write had seemed like such a good idea at first. Coln had been frustrated at the Bureau’s lack of information. They knew the PC was hiding technology from them, but they had no clue what it was. They knew Write had something integral to do with the PC’s operations, but they weren’t sure why. They wanted to keep trailing him, but they’d made too many promises. The Bureau had been ready to just leave Write alone.

Coln sighed, taking a sip of his drink. He’d picked the wrong mission. Write planned to leave within the day, taking the unfortunate scientist with him. And then Coln would be left by himself, a fugitive and a fool.

“That kid is a fool,” Lanna said.

“I know,” Jason mumbled. “But at least he has passion. And courage.”

“Not courage—brashness.”

“Call it what you will,” Jason said, Sensing the young UIB agent standing a short distance away.

“What’s more,” Lanna continued, “he may have passion, but that passion is hatred of you. I’ve been doing some searching. It appears that you were the focus of several of his research projects back when he was an undergraduate. None of his conclusions were flattering, old man. You should read some of these things. . . .”

Lanna continued to speak, but Jason’s mind drifted. His thoughts kept coming back to Denise. Who had taken her, and what had they done?

She doesn’t understand violence, Jason thought. She didn’t understand violence, and she hadn’t ever tasted salt. She spoke oddly, in a way that was almost familiar. She couldn’t walk or use her muscles. It was almost . . .

Jason took in a sharp, surprised breath.

Almost as if she’s accustomed to another body.

“What?” Lanna demanded.

“Denise Carlson is dead,” he said.

“What! What happened to her?”

Jason was silent for a moment.

“Jason! What happened!”

Jason ignored her, turning and walking back into his room. He strode out into his hallway, then made his way to the room beside his own—not Coln’s, but the one on the other side. He threw open the door, not bothering to knock.

Denise sat up with surprise, but relaxed when she realized who he was. Jason strode past her without saying a word, walking to her room’s control panel. He entered a few commands, and the light in the room grew far brighter, the bulbs turning slightly red in color.

“How is that?” he asked, turning to her.

Denise regarded him with confusion. “It’s nice. It feels right for some reason.”

Jason nodded once. The light was bright enough that most people would find it very uncomfortable—in Jason’s mind it was a virtual roar.

“Please,” Denise said, holding her hands forward. “Tell to me what you are doing.” Her hands held forward—forward in the Varvax gesture of supplication. He should have seen it sooner.

“Jason, you’re freaking me out,” Lanna said in his ear.

“This isn’t Denise Carlson,” Jason said quietly.

“What? Who is it?”

“Its name is Vahnn,” Jason explained.

Suddenly, Coln pushed his way into the room. He immediately shielded his eyes from the light—light that imitated a harsh, hot sun, one that required a strong crystalline carapace to provide protection.

“What are you doing, you maniac!” Coln said, pushing past Jason and altering the controls to the room. Then he turned to Denise. “Are you all right?”

“I . . .” Denise said. “Yes, why would I not be?”

Coln turned harsh eyes toward Jason. Then he paused, frowning.

“What?” Jason asked.

“Why are you looking at me like that, Write?” Coln demanded.

“Like what?”

Coln shivered. “Your eyes . . . it’s like you’re looking past me. Like . . .”

Jason reached unconsciously for his face, feeling for sunglasses that weren’t there. He had forgotten he wasn’t wearing them. He turned from the room in shame, rushing out into the hallway.

I mustn’t let him see—mustn’t let him know. He’ll mock me. He’ll laugh. . . .

Coln stayed behind, watching with confusion as he knelt beside the creature that had the body of a woman and the mind of an alien.

“It’s not possible,” Lanna said.

“They said that about psionics years ago,” Jason said, striding down a walkway outside the hotel.

“But, it’s just so . . .”

“So what?”

Lanna sighed in frustration. “All right, let’s assume you’re correct. Who would do such a thing? Why switch someone’s mind for an alien’s? What good would it do them?”

“The Varvax are the most developed Cytonics in the galaxy,” Jason said, speaking quietly as he passed people on Evensong’s dark streets.

“So?”

“So,” Jason said, “what could you learn if you could spend a few years in a Varvax’s head? What if you could get into a Varvax body somehow and infiltrate their society? Someone tried to get hold of a Varvax host—but something went wrong. The body they stole was killed, or perhaps the transfer went wrong. They disposed of the Varvax body afterward and left Denise wandering the streets.”

“But why Denise?”

Jason paused. “I don’t know. Maybe she was one of them—a spy of some sort. When a better opportunity came along, she took it.”

“That’s weak reasoning, old man.”

“I know,” Jason admitted. “But I can’t think of anything else right now. All I know is that the woman back in my rooms is not human. She acts like a Varvax, thinks like a Varvax, and gestures like a Varvax.”

“She speaks English,” Lanna pointed out.

“Many Varvax study English,” Jason said. “Or, at least, understand it. They find spoken languages interesting. Besides, maybe her body retained a residual understanding of speech and motion.”

“Maybe,” Lanna said, sounding unconvinced. “Where are you going?”

“You’ll see.” Jason continued on his way for a short distance until he came to the mental hospital. He strode in, and the same nurse sat behind the desk. She raised an eyebrow at him, confused and a little disapproving.

Jason ignored her, striding into the facility itself.

“Sir!” she called. “You can’t go in there! Sir, you don’t have . . .” her voice trailed off, but soon she began calling for security.

“The nurse?” Lanna said, listening. “You’re back at the hospital? So, you’ve finally admitted that you’re insane and decided to commit yourself?”

Orderlies, nurses, and even some patients began to look into the hallway. *He’d better be here*, Jason thought. Just after the thought occurred to him, he sensed a familiar face peeking out of one of the rooms.

“Please alert the Evensong Police Department, Lanna,” Jason said. “They’re about to get a report of a madman attacking one of the orderlies in this hospital. Please tell them to ignore it.”

“Jason, you are a very strange man.”

Jason smiled, then spun and burst into the room. Several orderlies jumped back in surprise at Jason’s entrance—the buzzing white room was some kind of employee lounge. The orderly, the one Jason had seen at the cafe, immediately turned to run. Jason jumped forward and snatched the man in one hand, then spun him around.

The man struggled, but knee to the groin stopped that. Jason pulled off his glasses, then grabbed the man’s head with both hands and turned it toward him.

“Who sent you?” Jason asked, staring at the man with his sightless eyes.

The man stared back defiantly.

“Ah, I see,” Jason said, hold the man’s head in both of his hands. “Yes, I can read your thoughts easily. Very interesting. Ah, and yes. So they switched minds, did they? I didn’t know that was possible. Thank you, you’ve been very informative.”

Jason released the surprised man’s head.

Lanna snorted in his ear. “Jason, unless you’ve been hiding some strange powers for a very long time, that was the biggest load of lies I’ve ever heard.”

“Yes,” Jason said, replacing his glasses and striding out of the room. “But they don’t know that.”

“What’s the point?” Lanna asked.

“Be patient,” Jason chided, holding up his hands as security guards entered the hallway. “I was just leaving,” he said, then pushed past them and left the hospital.

Back at the hotel, Jason gathered Denise and Coln in his room. One regarded him with customary wide-eyed confusion, the other with equally customary hostility. Jason removed his pin and handed it to Coln.

“There is a ship chartered for Jupiter Fourteen,” Jason said. “Be on it when it leaves, and take Denise with you. Go to the PC office, and they will protect you from the Bureau.”

“What about you, Write?” Coln asked suspiciously.

“If I’m right, I should be going somewhere else in a bit. You should get moving—the ship leaves in less than an hour.”

Coln frowned. Jason could sense the apprehension in his face. He didn’t want to accept the PC’s help, but he also didn’t want to face the Bureau’s justice. Hopefully, he would see to Denise’s safety.

After a short internal debate, Coln nodded and stood. “I’ll do it, Write. But first I want you to tell me something. Answer one question for me.”

“What?”

“Do you have what everyone says you do?”

Jason frowned. “Have what?”

“FTL engines,” Coln said. “Does the PC have the technology to create them or not? Have you been withholding the secret of FTL travel from the rest of humankind?”

Jason paused. “You’re asking the wrong question,” he finally said.

Coln’s expression darkened. “I knew you wouldn’t answer,” he said, turning toward Denise’s chair. “Come on, Denise.”

Denise didn’t move. She slumped in her chair, eyes closed.

“Denise!” Coln said urgently, kneeling beside her. She appeared to be breathing, but . . .

Jason began to feel light-headed, and he noticed a faint scent in the air. He cursed quietly, turning to dash across the room. He stumbled halfway to the door, losing his balance. He barely even felt himself hit the ground.

They work fast. Must have already been prepared to gas us. . . .

Jason awoke to blackness. Pure, horrifying blackness. There was no sight, no Sense, no feelings at all. The darkness had returned.

Jason began to shake. *No! It can't be! Where is my Sense!* He curled up, barely feeling the cold metallic floor below him. The blackness swallowed him—it was more than just darkness, it was a nothingness. A lack of sensation. It was the one true terror in Jason's life. And it had returned. He whimpered despite himself, memories flooding in.

It had started with his night vision, as visual diseases often did. He remembered the nights spent in bed as a child, the darkness seeming to grow more and more oppressive. And then, it had started to come during the day. First his peripheral vision—it had been like the darkness was following him, enveloping him. Each morning when he awoke, it had seemed that the darkness was closer. It had crouched like a beast in the corner of his vision.

Terror. The doctors had been able to do nothing. Jason had been forced to try and live his life as normal, the darkness seeming to grow closer every moment. He had lived in perpetual fear of what must come.

And then there had been the children. The other children, who hadn't understood. He had tried to go on as normal, tried to live his life as if nothing were wrong. He should have admitted it to them. As it was, they only saw a stumbling fool. They had laughed. Oh, how they had laughed.

Jason screamed, as if yelling could push back the darkness. Where was his Sense? What was wrong? He flailed in the darkness, his fingers brushing a wall. He pulled back into a corner, frightened and confused.

"How did you do it?" a voice asked from above.

Jason looked up, but didn't see, or Sense, anything.

"Tell me, Mr. Write," the voice demanded. "Can you read minds? This is impossible of Cyto—even the Varvax cannot penetrate an individual's thoughts. How did you do it?"

Jason didn't respond. The darkness. The blackness.

I did this on purpose, a piece of Jason's mind thought. I baited them. I wanted to get their attention, so they would bring me to them. They did. This is what I wanted.

But . . . the darkness.

"How!" Jason croaked. "How have you taken it away?"

"Answer my questions, Mr. Write," the voice said, "and I will return your Sense. How did you read that man's mind?"

Jason shuddered, pulling back against the cold telanium. The man's voice was harsh and guttural. He spoke oddly—with an accent of some sort, but not one that Jason recognized.

It's not permanent, Jason told himself. The darkness will go away. Just like it did when you developed Cyto.

"I am not a patient man, Mr. Write," the voice warned. "Speak, and I will let your companions live."

Coln, Denise. They were in the room with me.

Jason didn't answer. He sat, breathing deeply, struggling to remain sane. Ever since he had developed Cyto, he had never been in darkness. His Sense worked even when there was no light.

"Lanna?" Jason whispered, feeling the darkness advance on him. "Lanna!"

"The link to your home base has been cut, Mr. Write," the voice said.

Jason whimpered. The darkness seemed to be growing closer—closer to devouring his mind.

"As you wish, Mr. Write," the voice said. "I will give you three minutes. If you don't have an answer for me by then, the woman dies."

A click, then silence. It seemed worse without the voice—suddenly Jason wished he had kept the man talking. He wished he had told the voice the truth, that he couldn't read minds. Anything to keep someone else there.

Now he had no one.

I can't do this! Jason thought. *Anything but this. I lived this horror once. I can't do it again!* He tried to push out with mindblades, but nothing happened.

Be calm, Jason. Control yourself. The Varvax said something about this. Sonn had said it once. He had been reserved and uncomfortable—odd for a Varvax. Jason had asked if there was a way to suppress Cytonic ability. Sonn had eventually admitted there was, but had told Jason he wouldn't need it. Not yet.

The darkness . . .

No! Stay focused. You don't have time for fear. There was probably a technological aspect to the suppressant device. Many Cytonic abilities had mechanical halves—like the FTL comm feed, which wouldn't work without physical receivers. The Cytonic behind his imprisonment would be feeding part of his mental energy into a physical device, one that used electricity to amplify the effect. But because of that augmentation, Jason would never be able to break free. He would be trapped forever in the blackness.

Not forever. Just another few minutes, until they kill me. That would almost be preferable. An image came to him. An image of humankind escaping into space. An image of human merchants trading and cheating, of human tyrants capturing the technologically inferior Varvax, Tenasi, and Hommar. Images of wars, of fighting, of a paradise destroyed.

I can't let that happen!

But, what could he do? He felt along the wall, stumbling to his feet and feeling his way around the room. It was small, perhaps two meters square. He could barely feel the seal of the door—there wasn't a handle on his side.

There's not enough time! Jason thought with desperation. *I can't escape, I can't contact Lanna—* He couldn't contact Lanna, but . . . He reached up to his ear, tapping at the control disk. They had broken his link to the home base, but perhaps they hadn't thought of stowaways. . . .

"You won't get away with this!" Coln screamed to the empty room. "I'm a UIB agent. There are serious repercussions for the imprisonment of a law enforcement officer!"

There was no answer. Coln sighed, his rage weakening before sheer boredom. He had awakened in this room, which appeared to be some sort of storage closet, with a headache. He hadn't heard a thing outside the door since that time. Denise was there too, sitting quietly on a box.

What is Write planning? Coln thought. *He had us captured, but why?* It had to have something to do with the PC master plan, whatever that was.

Suddenly a sound crackled in his ear. "Coln?" The voice crackled sickly—like whispers from the lips of a dead man.

"Write?" Coln asked. "Why did you imprison me!"

"Hush, Coln," the voice whispered. "We are both imprisoned. We are going to die unless you can do something."

"Something?" Coln asked suspiciously. "What?"

"You need to knock out the power. Blow a fuse, overload a circuit—do something."

Coln frowned. "What good will that do? They'll have backups."

"Just do it." The link crackled off.

Coln swore quietly. What was Write planning this time? Dared he trust the man? Dared he do otherwise?

Denise watched with confusion as Coln searched through the small room, pushing aside boxes and carts. Eventually, he found a power jack on the wall. He stood for a moment, regarding it. Finally, he sighed and unloosed a piece of steel from a nearby box's constraint. *Why not? It's not like I can get into more trouble than I'm already in.*

Jason couldn't escape the darkness. He couldn't shut his eyes against it, he couldn't run away from it, and he couldn't ignore it. He could only huddle against the wall, feeling his resolve—and his sanity—grow weaker by the second. He heard, but didn't understand, the voice when it returned. His captors had made a grave mistake. They could make all the demands they wanted, but he was in no condition to respond to them. They could kill him. It wouldn't matter.

The voice screamed at him. Jason felt his sanity slipping. He couldn't struggle against it. He didn't want to struggle against it. Struggling would be far too difficult. Blissful unconsciousness was the only answer—a silencing of thought and perception.

At that moment, his Sense returned.

It was only a blip—a fractional waver in the power level. But it was enough. Sense flooded into Jason like drugs into an addict's veins. It immediately began to fade, the suppressor coming back on line.

Jason blasted out a thousand mindblades at once, shredding the walls around him. He shattered the telanium into chunks, the chunks to chips, and the chips to dust. The walls dissolved like tissue paper before a nuclear blast, spraying grains of metal away from him. He screamed as he let out the surge of power, a bestial yell to push back the darkness.

The suppressor immediately fell dead, its mechanisms destroyed by the blast. Jason lay huddled, his suit stained with dirt and sweat, on a bright telanium floor. He reveled in his returned Sense for a wonderful, silent moment. However, with Sense came sanity—the two were inseparable to him.

There is another Cytonic in here, and he's not going to be pleased that I've escaped.
So, taking a deep breath, Jason forced himself to stand.

Coln sat, stunned. He held a piece of rubber in his hand—the very same he had used to grip the metal as he rammed it into the power jack. He had expected a slight reaction; he hadn't expected the room next to his own to explode.

Coln blinked, dusting the silvery telanium flakes off of his clothes. *What . . . ?* he thought with amazement, rubbing some of the telanium grains between his fingers. *What could have done this?* Modern weaponry had difficulty even scarring telanium.

He looked up, and saw Jason Write standing in the direct center of the explosion. The operative's suit was torn. Coln let the telanium dust trickle from his stunned fingers as he saw Write's eyes. Like before, they were unfocused, even unresponsive. They stared dully forward, motionless, like the eyes of . . . a blind man.

"What are you?" Coln whispered.

Write ignored the question. "Take the girl and go," he said, his voice calm but ominous. "This area is about to become very dangerous."

Coln nodded, reaching for the frightened Denise's hand. At that moment, a new voice spoke—one Coln didn't recognize.

"Oh, come now, Mr. Write," the voice said. "Must we stoop to such assumptions? Are we not . . . civilized?"

Write didn't turn toward the source of the sound—a speaker on the wall. "Show yourself."

There was silence. The sound of footsteps. Coln pushed Denise behind him, turning wary eyes on the hallway outside their rooms—the hallway that was now exposed, thanks to the strange explosion.

A figure appeared in the hallway. He was nondescript save for a long nose and a thin body. He wore a sharp navy suit, and he was smiling as he strolled forward, scuffing the layer of telanium dust.

"Tell me who you are," Write said, turning to face the man with his unfocused eyes.

"Come, Jason," the man said. "Don't you recognize me?"

"No."

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised," the man said, continuing to stroll around the room. "It has been several years, and I really wasn't all that important. Just one of your many recruits. My name was Edmund."

The room fell silent. “Why did you try to kill Coln?” Write finally asked.

Edmund just smiled. “Even for a PC agent, you’re an extremely secretive man, Jason. You’ve been hiding things from the Varvax. If they knew that you could create mindblades, they’d certainly be tempted to elevate humankind’s intelligence designation.”

Write frowned. “It was a test. You wanted to see if I could stop the bullets.”

“And I was not disappointed,” Edmund said, stopping just in front of Write. “Mindblades are very advanced, Jason. Another few decades of study, and you might get FTL. I’m impressed.”

The two men stood facing each other—yet neither one’s eyes focused on his opponent. They remained like that for a tense few moments, and Coln frowned. He felt like something important was on the verge of happening, but it never occurred.

What is going on?

Jason fought for his life. Hundreds of mindblades whipped toward him, invisible blasts of pure thought. It was all he could do to keep them from shredding his flesh. He fought back, sending his own mindblades to block those of his opponent—an opponent he still didn’t understand.

He vaguely remembered Edmund—though he hadn’t known his face well enough that he had recognized him in the cafe. Edmund had been a man with some Cytonic potential. He had run away from the PC after just a few months of training. That had only been two years ago—how had he learned so much in such little time?

The barrage of mindblades slackened, and Edmund stepped back. He was still smiling, but there was reservation in his eyes. He hadn’t expected Jason to be as good as he was.

Jason breathed deeply. Coln was watching from a short distance away, his face confused—he hadn’t been able to see the insane battle Jason had just fought.

“I’m impressed again, Jason,” Edmund said.

Jason felt sweat trickle down his cheek. He could smell his own exhaustion. “I wouldn’t have expected you to know how to block mindblades,” Edmund continued. “Few of us have even practiced that.”

Jason stood stiffly. “I’ve been expecting this for some time,” he whispered. “I knew I couldn’t keep it away from people like you. I knew that some day I would have to fight.”

“You prepared well.”

The mindblades struck again. Jason grunted, whipping out with his own blades. There was a faint ripple to his Sense when a mindblade was about to appear, and he sliced at that area with his own blade. The blasts canceled each other out, wavering in his Sense like two curves of light. He blocked hundreds of them, the air around him shining like he was in the middle of an explosion.

I can’t keep this up long. Eventually a mindblade would break through. Jason had only one card to play—he would have to make it count.

Jason continued to fight, waiting for the right time. Edmund was better than Jason was. It shouldn't have been possible—Jason had been practicing Cyto longer than any other man. How could someone have overtaken him so quickly? Jason had to find out. Otherwise, all he had worked for would be lost.

The attack retreated again. Edmund was perspiring now—at least it was difficult for him.

“You learned from the Varvax well,” Jason said, gambling.

Edmund looked up with surprise. Then he laughed. “So you can't read minds after all,” he said with a smile. “That was quite the bluff.”

I was wrong, Jason thought. But, how then . . . ?

“Goodbye, Jason Write.”

Jason felt the air waver around him. More mindblades than he could count began to form—it was like he was being circled in a dome of pure energy. He couldn't block them all. He would die.

Now!

Jason focused on himself. He didn't raise any mindblades. Instead, he Sensed inward. He felt his own vibration in his Sense, a cool black-clothed creature. So different than the boy he had once been. The boy had been stupefied, made immobile, by his horror.

Jason was no longer that boy. With a scream, he felt the mindblades descend around him, and he threw himself willingly into the darkness.

All was still.

The blackness enveloped him, the non-existence that had threatened him since childhood. Except this time he had come to it by choice. He suffocated for an eternal moment in its embrace.

Then he reappeared. As he reentered normal space, he pushed the air away, lest its molecules get trapped within his appearing body. In a similar manner, he pushed Edmund's flesh away from his hand.

The world shook, and Jason was back. He stood with arm extended directly in front of Edmund. Jason's wrist ended abruptly where it met Edmund's flesh—his hand had materialized inside of the man's chest.

Edmund's heart, gripped in Jason's fist, thumped once. Edmund's eyes stared ahead in shock. Behind, the place where Jason had been a moment earlier exploded with mindblades.

Jason squeezed once, and Edmund cried out in pain. The heart stopped beating. Edmund slid to his knees, and Jason pushed his hand slightly outside space and withdrew it.

Edmund fell backward, staring with surprised, agonized eyes. He didn't fall unconscious as he died—he was far too powerful a Cytonic for that. Instead, he just whispered.

“FTL transmission. Jason, you surprise me again. We had no idea. . . .”

Jason knelt beside the man. “I've had it for some time. Tell me. Tell me how you did it. Where did you learn such powers?”

The man laughed, a pained hacking laugh. “I've studied it all my life, Jason.”

“How?” Jason demanded.

Somehow, Edmund met Jason’s eyes. “Ah, you’re such an idealist, Jason of the Phone Company. Sometime, you must ask yourself this. Why would a race such as the Varvax need to learn an ability such as Cytonic suppression?”

Jason paused, his mind growing numb. He only knew one answer, one he had barely dared consider. “To keep prisoners.”

“Prisoners?” Edmund coughed. “Original thinkers! Dissenters! Anyone who doesn’t agree with them.”

“You lie!”

Edmund laughed, his back arching in pain. “And you will be our escape,” he said, his voice growing loud until he was practically screaming. “They’ve had their paradise long enough. You nearly went mad after spending just a few minutes without your Sense—imagine living your life in such a box! You see only the peace, you see only the perfect society.

“You don’t see the price!”

Edmund’s final breath hissed out, and his body fell limp.

“You lie,” Jason whispered. “They are a peaceful people. We are the monsters, not them. . . .” He sat for a moment, regarding the fallen body. Coln still stood a short distance away, looking amazed—and confused.

“Come here,” Jason said quietly. “Bring the girl.”

Coln obeyed without a word. Jason put a hand on each of them, then he entered the darkness once again.

Coln recognized the room immediately. He blinked once, trying to forget about the awful sense of emptiness he had just experienced. He was in a white, curved room—the operations center of PC Headquarters. The room pictured in his fuzzy holovid. Coln had studied its image hundreds of times, and now he was actually there.

Except PC Central Operations was on Earth, months away from Evensong. Coln breathed in with surprise. Write stood a short distance away, his suit tattered, blood seeping down his arms.

“You do have FTL travel!” Coln accused.

“Yes.”

“Then I was right!” Coln said. “You’ve been keeping FTL travel from humankind!”

“Yes.”

“Why?” Coln demanded. “What are you trying to protect us from?”

“I wasn’t trying to protect *us*,” Write said, walking over to the side of the room. He approached the wall—the one that was supposed to house the FTL communication machinery—and pulled a

lever. A small cup popped out the bottom, followed by a stream of steaming coffee. “I was trying to protect them. And prepare us.”

“Prepare us?” Coln asked.

“The exchange programs,” Write said. “The outreach programs—even the skin-color fad. Anything to make us more open-minded. Of course, it doesn’t really matter now, does it?”

Coln frowned, then eyed the coffee machine. “So, it’s not the FTL comm unit. . . .”

Write shook his head, then pointed to the side. A man, the man Coln had mistaken for a security guard in the holovid, sat quietly in a chair a short distance away. The man had his eyes closed.

“His mind,” Write said. “It powers all of the FTL calls.”

“But,” Coln said, “there are millions of them. . . .”

“All you need is one mind to provide the FTL capability,” Jason explained. “Computers can do the actual routing.”

Coln hissed quietly in surprise.

“Technology is limited,” Jason said. “Only the mind is infinite.”

Further questions were forestalled as the door to the room slammed open and a red-haired woman burst into the room. She immediately ran forward and grabbed Write in a powerful embrace. “What happened!” she demanded, and Coln instantly recognized Lanna’s voice.

“Coln,” Write mumbled, “meet Lanna Write. My wife.”

“What? Your *wife*?”

“Unfortunately,” Write said. There was fondness in his voice.

“But,” Coln objected, “the Bureau has bugged your communications dozens of times—you always complain when she’s assigned to you!”

“Yes, and he does the assigning,” Lanna said, checking the small wounds on Write’s arms. “He always says that the less the Bureau knows about his personal life, the better. Besides, he can’t help teasing me.” She looked up at Write. “All right, sit down and tell me what’s going on. The medic is on his way.”

Write sighed, taking another sip of his drink. “I might have been wrong, Lanna.”

“About what?”

“About everything,” he said, his voice haunted.

Jason sat in his quarters, letting the medic bandage his arms. Lanna stood, dissatisfied, a short distance away. She was the terror of PC Central Operations—few men had the courage, or the stupidity, to incur her wrath.

“All right, old man,” she said. “What happened?”

Jason shook his head. Before he could reply, his holovid beeped. Jason punched the button, and Sonn's chitinous face appeared.

"You have some explaining to do, Sonn," Jason said.

The Varvax put forward his hands in supplication. "I am at your disposal, Jason of the Phone Company."

Jason pushed a button, showing Sonn an image of Denise being questioned by PC operatives. "Tell me it's not true, Sonn," Jason pled quietly. "Tell me you don't lock your discontents away."

"Varvax discontents?" Lanna asked with surprise.

Sonn raised his hands, a sign of apology. "I said that you would discover the reason for Cytonic-suppression eventually, Jason of the Phone Company."

Jason bowed his head. *No. It can't be. . . .*

"It is the only way," Sonn said. "The way to have peace."

"Peace for those who agree with you," Jason spat.

"It is the only way."

"And the others?" Jason demanded. "The Tenasi, the Hallo?"

"The same," Sonn said. "They have discovered the way, as you will eventually. The way to Prime Intelligence. I must apologize for the inconvenience we have given to you."

Jason sat, stunned. He was wrong. All of these years, over a century of work, and he was wrong. They had deceived him. Suddenly, he felt sick—sick, and angry.

"They're going to come for you, Sonn," Jason said, nodding thankfully to the medic as he finished the bandaging. The man was trustworthy—one of the first Cytonics Jason had recruited over a hundred years before.

"Excuse me, Jason of the Phone Company?" Sonn asked after a short pause. His hands were pulled back in the Varvax sign of confusion.

The medic left and Lanna sat down beside Jason. She watched Sonn with calculating eyes—she had never liked the Varvax. She said she didn't like people who could so easily falsify their body language.

"The ambassador—the one who died," Jason said. "He was a discontent. I have him now. I thought humans were trying to infiltrate Varvax society; I didn't realize that it was the other way around. Your dissidents are escaping, and they're hiding among us. They're trying to get hold of human technology. We're still uncivilized, Sonn. We have some war machines that could blast down your ships without even pausing."

Sonn maintained his sign of confusion, then augmented it with one of worry. Few people know that the Tenasi ambassadorial vessel that had been shot down over Earth had been one of the most advanced, most powerful ships in the galaxy. A single human missile had destroyed it. The other species had far inferior technology.

“This is disturbing,” Sonn admitted.

“I know,” Jason said. Then he reached over and cut the connection. Sonn’s face fuzzed and disappeared.

Jason leaned back with a sigh, Sensing Lanna beside him. He’d known it was coming—he’d feared that he couldn’t keep humankind out of space. He just hadn’t expected heaven to fail him.

“I’m sorry,” Lanna whispered.

Jason shook his head. “You always warned me that I was too idealistic.”

“I wanted to believe you anyway,” Lanna said. She slowly trailed her hand along his cheek. “Do you think the one who attacked you was the only one?”

“Not a chance,” Jason said. “He was too confident.”

“Then . . .”

Jason took a deep breath. “Prepare a press release, Lanna. Tell them that the Phone Company has finally developed faster-than-light travel, and that we will release it to the public as soon as the United Governments approves our patent.”

Lanna nodded.

“Perhaps we can salvage something from paradise,” Jason whispered.